Fool That You Are: Subverting the Reader in Robbins's *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*

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The story in Tom Robbins's *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (1994)—told in that rarest of literary voices, the second person—revolves around the central symbolic figure of the Fool. The most obvious manifestation of the Fool is the novel's protagonist, Gwen Mati, but her specificity is qualified by Robbins's construction of her character out of a series of recognizable archetypes. The most obvious of these derives from the tarot deck—in particular, the repeated appearance in the novel of the Fool card. It is not unusual for literature to utilize the tarot deck's symbolism (T. S. Eliot makes various references to it in "The Wasteland" [1922], for example) but Robbins's choice of the Fool card is especially important to the novel's ideas and structure. For while the cards, especially the Major Arcana, symbolize recurrent themes in life (death, love, etc.), the organizing principle of the tarot derives from the Fool, the "zero card" (so called in accordance with the numbering system of the deck) whose path is set out by the lay of the cards.

The Fool, in other words, is the protagonist of each one of the stories that are created during a tarot card reading. Apart from its use as a tool of divination, therefore, the tarot's essential task is to provide a series of varying fables about the path of the Fool as he or she wanders through life. Understanding that the novel is modeled on a tarot card reading goes a long way toward explaining the narrative strategy that Robbins employs in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*. The second person "you" is not an accusatory finger pointed by the author at the reader. Instead, Robbins is looking at the cards laid down by his protagonist as though he were a clairvoyant reading and interpreting

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"our" (Gwen's) path through life. Just as the person being given a tarot reading is meant to identify with the Fool (the Fool is "you"), so too the reader is meant to identify with Gwen. Robbins uses the second person not for 'you' to prescribe a manner of living, but as a narrative strategy designed to teach and test the reader by self-consciously leading him or her astray.

Folly and Madness

At first glance, this designation of Gwen (or of the reader through the narrative "you") as a Fool may appear to have purely negative connotations. We should be aware, however, that the madness of the Fool is not placed in simple juxtaposition to the sanity of the rest of the world, but instead reflects a floating, ironic definition of insanity. This logic is best captured, perhaps, by the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who famously wrote in his *Pensées* (1670): "Men are so necessarily mad that it would be another twist of madness not to be mad" (9). The "madness" of Gwen the Fool is defined by this double negation, a turning away from the conventions of society to such an extent that modern society, from the depths of its own craziness, condemns her (us) as mad. It is to this extent that the figure of the Fool takes on a more positive meaning: by rebelling against the collective insanity of the world, "madness" forms a mode of freedom that is grounded in this double negation. To grasp hold of this "madness," to take on the role of the Fool, is therefore, paradoxically, a subversive step toward wisdom and liberation, even though society does not perceive it as such.

Beyond the particular influence of the tarot and its central figure of the Fool, Robbins uses *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* to engage more generally with the history of madness in Western culture and its privileged position in revealing society's follies. In the second section of the novel, for instance, Robbins makes what appears to be a casual reference to the French theorist and historian Michel Foucault. He writes: "All you know is that you failed to hear the words "Dow Jones," "*deutsche mark*," or "Michel Foucault" pass through any lips" (*Frog* 22). Dropping Foucault's name in this manner, Robbins notifies the attentive reader that he is familiar with the work of this famous thinker. An intimate knowledge of Foucault's classic study *Madness*

and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (1961), furthermore, reveals that his overhaul of the modern understanding of madness and folly is indeed a crucial influence on the construction of *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*.

According to Foucault, Europe in the fifteenth century saw a shift in discourse that foregrounded madness, according it a greater level of public attention than ever before. The insane, who had once been allowed to live with little or no care or restriction, were increasingly subjected to a rigorous system of either confinement (an act made possible, argues Foucault, by the disappearance of leprosy during this period) or expulsion (as symbolized by the famous literary motif of the Ship of Fools). By the end of the Middle Ages, madness had acquired a new meaning—no longer did it refer to a moral failure on the part of the insane person, but was instead "a sort of great unreason for which nothing, in fact, is responsible, but which involves everyone in a kind of secret complicity" (Foucault 13). In literature, this expresses itself as a moral division between "folly" and "madness" that sets the ground for Robbins's own affirmation of the Fool:

> If folly leads each man into blindness where he is lost, the madman, on the contrary, reminds each man of his truth; in a comedy where each man deceives the other and dupes himself, the madman is comedy to the second degree: the deception of deception; he utters, in his simpleton's language which makes no show of reason, the words of reason that release, in the comic, the comedy[...] (14)

It is in this period, then, that the figure of the Fool emerges as an antidote to the folly of society, and it should be no surprise that the origins of the tarot deck, with its central figure of the Fool, derive from the fifteenth century. While this comical function of the madman as truth-teller is obviously crucial to *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* —such a figure is a recurring one in Robbins's fiction, from Larry Diamond in this work to the Chink in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) to Today is Tomorrow in *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates* (2000)—the notion of critical "madness" that Foucault outlines is explored in greater depth in this Robbins novel than any other.

Historically, the increased attention to the presence of insanity was less a material problem (in other words, the mad had not suddenly been identified as the root of some actual dysfunction) than the

expression of a deeper cultural and intellectual crisis that would gain ground in the late medieval period, undergo various mutations as the Renaissance and Enlightenment (the "classical age" in Foucault's terminology) came and went, until eventually, in the nineteenth century, it took on the modern values that we associate with it still today: insanity as a medical concern, a mental illness. Foucault is adamant, however, that the great confinement of the mad from the Middle Ages onward was not motivated by medicine. Instead, he argues, confinement was driven by a combination of economic concerns and morality, and it is for this reason that madmen were locked away in workhouses with the poor, the indigent, debtors, and everyone else whose lack of employment made them into a social problem. This apparently heterogeneous group of people was drawn into the workhouses, voluntarily or involuntarily, and forced to work. The theory behind this practice was that loose morals derive from idleness, making a return to labor the ideal path to rehabilitation. As Foucault points out, there was no attempt to treat or rehabilitate the insane during the initial project of confinement.

Although the "great confinement" that Foucault describes mutates into something rather different in the modern era, an important set of connections, crucial to the reading of *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, is nonetheless established already by this early example. Foucault's contention is that "labor was instituted as an exercise in moral reform and constraint, which reveals, if not the ultimate meaning, at least the essential justification of confinement" (60). The crucial link being made here, therefore, is between morality and labor, insofar as work becomes the measure of one's ethical stature. While the critique of consumerism in Robbins's novel is easily visible, he is not simply restating tired clichés about the greed and destructiveness of modern capitalism, but instead is offering a deeper analysis that goes to the very heart of Western rationality. If morality is connected to labor, if hard work is connected to virtue and in turn to moral reward, then the path of Gwen's (your) life stands in contradiction of this principle. In terms of following this conjunction of labor and morality, the legacy of Puritanism and the American dream, Gwen has behaved impeccably—estranging herself from her unproductive and dysfunctional family, putting herself through college to get ahead in her chosen field, and obsessively following the rise and fall of the stock market. In spite of these efforts, there is a disconnection between her

hard work and the "jumbo juice" she hopes to earn. Within the system of ethics she has absorbed, therefore, there seem to be only two conclusions: either she has not worked hard enough, so that her lack of her success is a reflection of her laziness; or, as Larry and Q-Jo try to convince her, she is a fool to buy at all into these misleading values. Foolish morality or liberatory "madness": it is Gwen's (and in turn, your) ethical sanity, far more than her/your material fixations, that is at issue in this novel.

So while the rejection of consumerism can be seen as an important aspect of *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, there is a strong sense in which Robbins treats it as the symptom of a deeper problem, in much the same way that Foucault sees the confinement of the mad as the product of a more profound shift in societal principles. Indeed, after the stock market crash in Robbins's novel, Seattle experiences a sudden increase in the number of poor and homeless living on its streets, a reversal of the era of confinement. But what really interests both Foucault and Robbins are the underlying values on which these practices are founded. The workhouses, for Foucault, constitute a concrete expression of this new cultural value of labor as morality. Work was valued because it possessed "an ethical transcendence" that was grounded in Christian thought (55). Relying strictly on God's providence—using it, in other words, as a way to "avoid" labor—was interpreted by the theologians of this period as an act of pride and arrogance, a test of God that was antithetical to Christ's example in the desert. Idleness, explains Foucault, was thus linked to pride, an arrogance in which the sinner expects God to take care of him or her rather than engaging in the work that was demanded of humanity after the Fall. Underlying this emergent work ethic, Foucault identifies a broader and more concrete motive:

> But in this great confinement of the classical age, the essential thing—and the new event—is that men were confined in cities of pure morality, where the law that should reign in all hearts was to be applied without compromise, without concession, in the rigorous forms of physical constraint. Morality permitted itself to be administered like trade or economy. (60–61)

Beneath this new understanding of work as morality lies a political dream: the creation of a pure and moral city, in which values and ethics are made uniform by the legislation of the authorities. All dissent

and disorder, from the unemployed to the lazy to the mad, are to be removed from sight by confinement. The totalitarian vision of this model of labor as morality is thus designed as a veiled mandate to reshape the social and economic landscape.

The foolish outcome of this attempt to legislate morality is an actual deterioration in the ethical capacity of the population as a whole. An ethics that is legislated from above may bring about all the outward signs of compliance, but the ability of the people to take its precepts to heart, to internalize it as their own ethics, is curtailed by this external mode of control. The people, in other words, may have the appearance of partaking in the prescribed morality, but in their hearts they follow a different set of rules, precisely because their reason for following the laws stems from the principle of self-preservation rather than an inherent belief in its virtues. If such external controls start to be removed (as Gwen witnesses when the stock market melts down in course of the novel), the lack of a genuine capacity for virtue becomes visible. There are two alternatives to this potential moral crisis: the implementation of a true ethics through the development of free thought, as preached by Larry Diamond and Q-Jo, or the shoring up of authoritarian power through the strengthening of external controls.

Cynicism: The Ambivalence of Rebellion

Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas is a call to arms against all prevailing forms of folly, and it is in this spirit of iconoclastic, humorous protest that Robbins's novels are to be read. The obvious task of the novel is to subvert you, the reader, by making you question your own values. However, we should be careful about how we interpret the specific strategies that underpin this mode of subversion. For instance, Robbins's statements about modern humanity's ethical shortcomings are typically understood as rants as didactic celebrations of radical free thought to be taken at face value. But while it is true that free thinking forms the core of Robbins's philosophy, he nonetheless makes his characters (and, in turn, you, his readers) think through the efficacy and the honesty of the rebellious act. It is our task to evaluate the validity of all statements, including, especially, those put forward by the author.

In a very particular sense, I want to claim that Robbins is a Cynic —not in the modern definition of the word, which has taken on the pejorative implication of someone who does not believe in the good motives of others, and does so with a sense of smugness and egoistic superiority—but in the same spirit of radical "kynicism" reclaimed by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). Robbins is not, in other words, a moral pessimist in the sense implied by the contemporary nuances of the word "cynicism," but instead stands closer to the classical conception of a Cynic. Cynicism began, it must be remembered, as a school of Greek philosophy. Founded by Antisthenes, one of Socrates's former students, its central purpose was to promote radical free thought. Its adherents became famous (or more often, infamous) for the outrageous ways in which they would attempt to challenge what they saw as the foolish conventions of society. Although this continual desire to flout the rules did not endear the Cynics to the public, and eventually gave the term the negative association it carries today, their philosophical goal of questioning the status quo set an important example for centuries to come.

I mention the Cynics in relation to Robbins not only because he employs many of their strategies—most notably his bizarre sense of humor and his repeated attempts to undermine the prejudices of his readers—but because like them he is very much aware of the limitations of open rebellion. There is a contradictory morality underlying the contemporary understanding of the term "cynicism," one that recoils, on the one hand, from the frequently ugly truths that the Cynics made people confront about themselves and society, and the pessimism that this philosophy seems to exude, on the other hand, when pushed to its extreme. Pessimism, as Friedrich Nietzsche argues in *The Will to Power* (1901), is the precursor to nihilism, the incapacity for belief that modern cynicism has come to mean. However, Nietzsche writes, the advent of nihilism is ultimately "*ambiguous*. A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism. B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism" (*Will* 17). Robbins's call to rebellion is framed by this dual necessity—to rebel against the slavish conventions of society as a gesture of spiritual vitality without sinking into the trap of foolish morality and its underlying nihilism.

Robbins thus uses this novel to engage in a rigorous critique of the successes and failures of rebellion. There is no straightforward

dichotomy in his work between "good" and "bad" rebellion, a point brought home by the ironic configuration of Gwen Mati's character. Her father Freddy, for example, is a poet who dresses in black, lives in squalor, smokes marijuana, and spends much of his time at all-night drum circles. Robbins portrays Gwen as having "rebelled" against her upbringing by transforming herself into a materialist, upwardly mobile capitalist who is obsessed with fast cars, fashionable clothes and, above all, making money. The construction of Gwen's character, in Robbins's sardonic twist, thus does not derive from a slavish imitation of her upbringing, but instead a frustrated desire to rebel against the permissiveness represented by her parents. Confronted with the impending collapse of the stock market, Gwen is forced to confront the reality of her failure to rebel, which is tied to her lack of financial success.

The aim of Robbins's Cynicism is to highlight the underlying ambivalence of humanity's venture into modernity. The way in which the modern rebel constructs his or her rebellion is inherently framed by what has come before, and it is from this simultaneous act of homage and rupture that the ambivalence of the seditious act derives. The novel's most obvious example of this inverted narcissism is Gwen, whose determination not to imitate her unconventional father transforms her into his binary opposite. Her identity is thus built entirely on a disavowed form of mimesis, in which Gwen rearranges the rhetorical surface of her life while unconsciously modeling her emotional and existential needs on her parents. Gwen is not alone in this process, as Robbins emphasizes through his choice of narrative perspective. This way of thinking has become the cultural norm, the prevailing psychology of modernity by which "you" construct yourself. The rebellious task of calling into question the blind folly of social convention that the ancient school of Cynic philosophy understood as a necessary task has thus been blunted.

Robbins calls for a strategic revival of the original Cynical spirit throughout *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, an idea he conveys through the recurring symbol of the dog. The etymology of the term "Cynic," after all, traces its Greek origins back to the word "*kynikos*," which means "like a dog." There are various theories about the origins of this term: detractors of the School understood it as a reference to the anti-social behavior of its members, a commentary on their crude and confrontational practices. According to most scholars, however, the

term probably derives from the "*Kynosarge*," or the "Grey Dog," the name of the gymnasium where Antisthenes, the School's founder, met with his followers. Whatever the true origins of the word, what is certain is that the Cynics used the dog as their primary symbol, and Robbins takes it up again as a key emblem in his novel.

The dog motif in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* is introduced in the second chapter of the book, which bears the heading "Barking at the Moon." This title is a reference not only to the traditional association of the moon with madness ("lunacy"), but also alludes to one of the hieroglyphic keys in the tarot deck. The card marked "The Moon" is described in Ruth Ann and Wald Amberstone's *The Secret Language of Tarot* (2008) as:

> the face of the divine feminine—of romance, mystery, wisdom and madness. [...] Lovers and thieves, werewolves and witches, medicine men, madmen and midwives—all are children of the moon. [...] To see by her light is to see in a mirror, by reflection, so nothing is certain. Distortion is always possible, mistakes are easily made, hard edges are banished, and shadows rule. Because of this, the Moon card in tarot is associated with deceit and delusion. (92)

This lunar symbolism recurs throughout the book, and its relevance is solidified by its connection to Gwen's best friend, Q-Jo Huffington, a clairvoyant who makes her living from reading tarot cards. Q-Jo, in turn, is a wry pop cultural reference to Stephen King's novel *Cujo* (1981), in which a rabid dog terrorizes a mother and son trapped in a car. Bringing the lunar and canine symbolism together, Robbins announces a revival of the Cynical spirit that achieves its ends not by direct challenge, but by a game of careful subversion.

Alluding to the "*Kynosarge*," the meeting place that gave the Cynics their name, the reader first encounters Q-Jo in person as she devours pork chops at a diner called the Dog House. The motif, however, is first introduced shortly before Gwen and Q-Jo's arrival at this location. The two meet up initially at the Virginia Inn, a hang-out that is popular amongst Seattle's artists and intellectuals. It is there that Gwen encounters a strange phenomenon:

> [M]any people in the Virginia Inn were barking. Yes, *barking*! There they were, Seattle's poets, painters, musicians, and filmmakers; people whom one would guess might be cultured and sophisti-

> cated; but were they discussing Gödel, Escher, or Bach; were they casting a particularly illuminating light upon the stock-market crash, relating it to McLuhanian technology theory or "The Fall of the House of Usher"? Maybe they were at that. [...] All you know is that you [...] did hear an inordinate amount of barking.
>
> (Robbins, *Frog* 22)

This apparently absurd scene gains new meaning when viewed in the light of the novel's dog symbolism. Read as an allusion back to the Cynics, the "dog-like" philosophers of the classical world, Robbins seems to be saying that the poets, painters, musicians, and filmmakers are the ones who have inherited the Cynical tradition in the modern world. This particular section of society has been given the task of challenging the conventions of society, of shaking the populace out of its foolish complacency.

We should be wary, however, of seeing this as Robbins's straightforward affirmation of the artistic community. Nor should it be construed as the implicit elevation of himself (as part of this community) to a kind of messianic role. To do so would be to ignore the overall ambivalence towards rebellion that Robbins demonstrates throughout the novel. Art is not necessarily a means of finding salvation, nor is the artist a "savior" or "hero" in that sense, a point that Robbins makes particularly clear in his critique of the art world in *Skinny Legs and All* (1990). Nonetheless, art does have an advantage over other discourses, insofar as its purpose, following the definition of artistic discourse articulated by Victor Shklovsky, is to take the familiar and make it seem strange. In this sense, the artist has ready access to tools that ally him or her with the unsettling project of the Cynics. Knowing how to use these tools effectively, Robbins demonstrates, is another matter altogether.

When the dog motif is referenced later in the novel by Dr. Yamaguchi, a Japanese doctor who claims to have found the cure for cancer, this ambivalence is extended beyond the emotions into the realm of interpretation. "You are having many questions," says Yamaguchi, "But we must bear in our minds that best of answers is not always reliable. Answers can be open to interpretation. Answers are tricky things" (51). To illustrate his point, the doctor recounts a famous story about the Chinese Zen master, Joshu.[1] Joshu is asked whether a dog has a Buddha nature, to which he replies: "*Wu*." Yamaguchi goes on:

> Now, please, *wu* is in Chinese language a negative response. [...] But the word have many fine shades of meaning. Many nuance. So, depending upon inflection, subtle nuance in pronunciation, *wu* could mean "absolutely not" or "probably not" or "possibly not" or "usually not." [...] So, for twelve hundred years, scholars have argue. Exactly what did Master Joshu intend by *wu*? [...] But I am here to tell you. (51)

Yamaguchi proceeds to explain that the master's answer was entirely misunderstood by his disciples, that Joshu did not say "*wu*" at all—rather, he said "*wuf*." Throwing his head back, the doctor closes his speech by barking repeatedly. Yamaguchi's reinterpretation encapsulates Robbins's attempt to articulate the ambivalence of rebellion. Combining the Eastern and Western traditions through the symbolism of the dog, Robbins highlights the power of the negative —the decision of the Cynics to say "no" to social convention, or the affirmative "*wu*" of Joshu. But this initial step is not enough, for this form of rebellion, despite bearing the momentary fruit of liberation, fails to move beyond the negative. The end result, as shown by revolution after revolution, is the return to the same ethical system under the guise of a new facade. Such is the philosophical "misunderstanding" that Yamaguchi identifies, for while the act of rebellion is obviously a necessary one, its potential must be directed into the creation of new values rather than simply the destruction of what came before. What is needed, in other words, is a triumph of "active" over "passive" nihilism.

The Rant

The most visible technique that Robbins uses to subvert the reader would appear to be the infamous rants that punctuate his fiction. The preponderance of truth-tellers and potential gurus in his novels who voice such opinions and pontifications should not, however, be mistaken for Robbins's own viewpoint, but must instead be approached with a degree of caution. Of course, all authors use their fiction to explore their ideas, but readers must be careful of taking such direct forms of address to heart, especially since Robbins himself repeatedly cautions against such a practice. In *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, for

example, Larry Diamond makes it absolutely clear to Gwen that he should not be treated as some kind of guru whose every word is gospel truth:

> Money may be our greatest spiritual teacher. More edifying than a stadium full of swamis. Nothing can knock a pilgrim off the path as fast as money. That's the job of a spiritual teacher, you know. Not to hold us on the path, but to knock us off of it. Until we can stay on the path without ever being knocked—or tempted—off, until we can resist the teacher's carrot and withstand his rod, our transformative journey can be little more than fits and starts.
> (Robbins, *Frog* 285–86)

The true spiritual teacher, in other words, does not teach by a process of mimesis. Instead, the teacher invites the student to learn the art of subversion, not through imitation, but by a staunch refusal to be removed from the path of their own free thought. Even when Robbins's apparent mouthpiece speaks with a posture of full authority, as if what he or she saying is absolutely true and must not be questioned, the reader nonetheless ought to evaluate whether what is being said is worthy on its own merits.

A prime example occurs in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* when Gwen accompanies Larry to a conference to discuss the disappearance of frogs from the planet. As soon as the floor is opened to the audience, Larry stands up and delivers a long rant about the connection between frogs, the Sirius constellation, the Nommo religion of the Bozo and Dogon tribes in Africa, evolution, and psychedelic mushrooms—in short, he argues, the frogs may have disappeared not because of environmental degradation but rather as a sign that the Nommo are returning. Gwen, in a fit of embarrassment, gets up and leaves, only to be pursued by Diamond. What ensues over the next fifty pages is an in-depth discussion, in a series of fits and starts, about the validity of Diamond's theory. This amphibian thread in the novel inevitably causes the reader to speculate about Robbins's own ideas about science and evolution. There are obvious similarities, for instance, between Diamond's ideas and the evolutionary theories of Terrence McKenna. McKenna was a close personal friend of Robbins's, sharing with him a key role in the American counterculture movement and a common enthusiasm for magic mushrooms. Psychedelic mushrooms are central to McKenna's theory about the evolution

of humanity. He argues that in Africa, in the period after the most recent ice age, early humans were repeatedly exposed to the effects of psilocybin from the mushrooms that sprouted in the feces of the animals around them. Further changes in climate, however, led to the disappearance of the magic mushroom, and the effect of this change in diet was reflected in human culture's return to a more brutal paradigm of social behavior. The intellectual connection between Robbins and McKenna is strengthened by their shared fascination with the *I Ching*, the influence of which is visible in both Robbins's first novel *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) and McKenna's "novelty theory," which uses the *I Ching*'s numerological system as the basis for predicting the end of history. As a final clue, there is Diamond's direct admission that McKenna's theories are a key influence on the formulation of his own ideas:

> One of McKenna's rants, no doubt. Imagine it: the hardy spores of psilocybic mushrooms blowing through darkest space, sifting and sailing, rubbing elbows with particles of cosmic dust for eons before finally entering Earth's atmosphere and eventually falling into bed, so to speak, into the moist soil of some prehistoric meadow. Where they spread their mycelia and display their fruit. Which, someday, inevitably, will be sampled by a hungry or merely curious primate. Bingo! [...] The mushroom may be the microphone of the overmind. (318)

In light of these multiple connections, the notion that Robbins is reproducing McKenna's theories, that he is spreading the "gospel" of freedom through hallucinogenic experience, as it were, is a tempting one. But to do so would be to ignore Diamond's earlier statement about the key function of the teacher. The truly critical reader is not supposed to be seduced by Robbins's ideas, to become his disciple, to turn into simply another replica of the master. Robbins's stated purpose as a teacher is to push us *off* the path, and as such it is Gwen's/our task as readers to recognize Diamond's/Robbins's subversive attempt to lead us astray.

The rhetorical force with which Robbins's so-called mouthpieces present their ideas, therefore, is not meant primarily to convince the reader. These rants are given to test us, to examine our susceptibility to the exigencies of authority and determine whether we really have what it takes to be true to ourselves. This repeated strategy is Rob-

bins's chief way of circumventing the internal problem of spreading the message of radical free thought. How, after all, does one spread such a message without simply creating followers (who, by definition, are not free thinkers)? The problem is not new: consider Henry David Thoreau, who famously exercised his self-reliance by departing from society and building a log cabin on the shores of Walden Pond. If our conclusion is that Thoreau's essential message is that we must follow his example, that we literally become free thinkers only by withdrawing to a pond in the woods, then we have surely missed the point. Robbins's conception of truly free thought means that any teacher, in order to subvert effectively, must recognize that free thinking cannot be instilled via a process of imitation, for that would only replicate the problematic structure of authority. Free thought cannot be taught, it can only be learned, and only through a process of repeated subversion.

The extended discussion about the return of the Nommo in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* gives numerous pointers regarding this subversive process. Diamond takes great care to present his discourse in a way that reveals the various strategies of authoritarian manipulation. He begins to elucidate his theories, for example, at a serious conference about the disappearance of frogs from the environment. The effect of this arena is twofold: first, it places him (and in turn Gwen, his companion) in a position of public scrutiny, making them vulnerable to the normalizing expectations of the audience's gaze (an effective strategy, since Gwen is particularly susceptible to being embarrassed); second, the conference stage means that Larry is expected to engage with the conventions of a certain type of discourse, one that is cloaked in the rationality of science and the ethical compassion of environmentalism. Diamond's willingness to leave the meeting in the wake of Gwen's hurried exit demonstrates both her sensitivity to public opinion and his disregard for it. Furthermore, it shows that his speech was never really aimed at the audience, but was intended instead for Gwen (and in turn, for us, the reader). Diamond's shrewdness lies in his understanding that while Gwen's struggle is an internal one, the intensity of that struggle has been increased by recent external events, from the stock market crash to the disappearance of Q-Jo. Here are your values, he challenges Gwen, do you really have the capacity to believe in them, to stop them from collapsing of their own accord?

Diamond's primary thrust is to lead Gwen along the merry dance of the Nommo story and, even with the withdrawal of the audience from the picture, engaging in a different mode of rhetorical authority. He achieves this through a number of little strategies—the overstated force of his argument, for example, and his feigned "refusal" to allow her to rebut him at length: "Don't interrupt," he says at one point (304). Beyond that, his argument is lent a certain validity by the sheer detail of his knowledge about the scientific, historical, religious, and astrological knowledge of the topic at hand, making it seem impossible to the outside observer that he is making up these theories as he goes along. Finally, there is his apparent willingness to open up his ideas to the empiricism of scientific testing. When Gwen insists that there must be a logical, scientific explanation for the Bozo's knowledge of Sirius B, for example, Diamond replies:

> Are you kidding? Conventional scientists wouldn't touch that problem with a ten-foot grant. Of course, not a dime of grant juice would ever be made available for such study. There're no apparent commercial or military applications, and, anyway, riddles of this sort scare scientists right out of their lab coats. They're as cowed by the big-time mysteries of the universe as the guy on the street and are only too happy to sweep them under a rug. (304)

While Diamond's rhetoric is designed to give him a certain aura of authority, we are reading the novel too literally if we think that Robbins wants us to swallow the idea that magic mushrooms are the transmission devices of an extraterrestrial "overmind" or Dr. Yamaguchi's belief that colon cancer can be cured by performing enemas with a jade-encrusted scepter. The appearance of these preposterous theories in the novel is designed to make us think twice about the very structure of belief. These hypotheses are not, after all, completely detached from all reason and empiricism, since they contain an internal and external logic that apes those of their scientific cousins. How did Dr. Yamaguchi manage to cure hundreds of patients with his strange enemas? How did the Dogon and Bozo tribes know about Sirius B centuries before science invented the powerful telescopes necessary to confirm its existence? Neither of these questions are really meant to be answered, but instead are there to subvert Gwen/us into thinking critically about what we accept as true and valuable.

Two different ways of reading Robbins's work thus emerge from this debate. The first (and, unfortunately, the most common) way is to take the jester at his word, to see his novels as a highhanded denunciation, a Larry Diamond-like rant against the hypocrisy of modern society. If we choose to read Robbins in this way, his works take on a didactic, prescriptive tinge, one that rests on an implicit moral authority. But to interpret Robbins in this manner goes against the grain of his writing, for it ascribes to his work some of the very features he takes great care to criticize—the empty rhetoric of moral authority being one of them. The greater point, then, and a second way of reading Robbins, is to see *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* as a subversive, self-reflexive exercise in free thought, a test to see whether "you" have really been listening. Only readers naïve enough to take Robbins's rants at face value are fooled. He is aping the rhetorical techniques of authority, employing a trickster's strategy designed to push the reader off the path rather than set us straight. Robbins does not want to be our guru, nor are his novels designed to be holy writ that must be imitated and put into practice. The reader should learn the lesson that Gwen picks up in the course of her discussion with Larry Diamond on the topic of Sirius and its supernatural connection to human fate. At first hostile to Larry's ideas, Gwen is plagued by a series of doubts and concessions that finally lead her, in a burst of confusion, to point out the seeming implausibility of it all: "You expect him to get huffy and call you 'hoptoad', but he [i.e. Diamond] smiles and says, 'That's good, pussy gravy. Frankly, I don't believe it, either'" (311). Diamond's rant, he frankly admits, was nothing more than a clever test to see if Gwen can be knocked off the path, or whether she has taken the crucial internal step toward developing her own capacity for free thought. One must keep this strategy of subversion in mind at all times when reading Robbins: he is not trying to convert you, he is only trying to push you off the path. You—that is to say, we, his readers—would be foolish to believe otherwise

Note

1. The story is recounted in *The Gateless Gate*, a collection of Zen writings, and is known as "Zhaozhou's Dog."

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